

Theology vol 88.

THE BISHOP OF LANDAFF'S

S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL,

ON FRIDAY, JANUARY 30, 1784.

Die Lunæ, 2^o Februarij, 1784.

ORDERED, by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, in Parliament assembled, That the Thanks of this House be, and are hereby, given to the Lord Bishop of Landaff, for the Sermon by him preached before this House, on Friday last, in the Abbey Church, Westminster; and he is hereby desired to cause the same to be forthwith printed and published.

ASHLEY COWPER,

Cler. Parliamentor.



S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL,

IN THE

ABBAY-CHURCH, WESTMINSTER,

ON FRIDAY, JANUARY 30, 1784.

Watson K
BY RICHARD, LORD BISHOP OF LANDAFF.

L O N D O N:

PRINTED BY J. NICHOLS,

FOR J. ROBSON, NEW-BOND-STREET; T. EVANS, PATER-
NOSTER-ROW; AND J. DEBRETT, PICCADILLY.

MDCCLXXXIV.



S E R M O N, &c.

P S A L M LVIII. 10.

— DOUBTLESS THERE IS A GOD THAT JUDGETH THE EARTH.

THERE have been but few men, since the beginning of the world, who have doubted concerning the Being of a God; but there have been many who have doubted concerning his Providence. That “there is a God” who made the Heavens and the Earth, all nations have been taught by Tradition, derived originally from Adam; and some individuals in every nation, scarcely excepting the most barbarous, have been able to collect the same truth from Reason. But that this God “judgeth the Earth” which he hath made, is a proposition which has not been so generally admitted; the Tradition concerning

B

cerning it has been less uniform : and Reason is distracted, in its investigation of the subject, by the opposition of proof ; or, to speak with more propriety, it is lost in the sublimity of the contemplation.

The term Providence, in its primary signification, simply denotes Foresight : and, if we allow the Existence of a Supreme Being who formed the Universe out of nothing, we must needs allow, that he has a perfect Foresight of every event which, at any time, takes place either in the natural or moral world. Matter can have no motion, nor spirit any energy, but what is derived from him : he cannot be ignorant of the effects which they will, either separately or conjointly, produce. A common Mechanic has knowledge of the work of his own hands ; when he puts the machine, which he has made, in motion, he foresees how long it will go, and what will be the state and position of its several parts at any particular point of time : or if he is not perfectly able to do this, it is because he is not perfectly acquainted with all the powers of the materials which he has used in its construction ; they are not of his making, and they may therefore have qualities which he does not understand, and consequently cannot regulate. But in the immense Machine of the Universe there is nothing except what God made ; all the powers and properties, relations and dependencies, which created things have, they have both in kind and degree from him. Nothing therefore, it should seem, can come to pass at any time, or in any part of the Universe, which its incomprehensible Architect did not, from the moment his Almighty *Fiat* called it into existence, clearly foresee : — “ Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the World.” — How this Foresight, from which we cannot,

cannot, perhaps, separate the idea of pre-ordination, can subsist in the Supreme Being without destroying the moral Agency of Man, is a matter beyond, probably, the reach of our faculties fully to comprehend. Some, conscious of their inability to reconcile the notion of human Agency with that of divine Foresight, have considered Men as Machines, and denied that they have any Agency at all. Others have conceded to the human Race freedom of thought and action; but have denied that God can certainly foresee free, contingent actions *. Without presuming to censure either of these sects of Philosophers for the opinions which they have adopted, or charging them with forming debasing and improper conceptions of the nature of either God or Man; we may be allowed, I hope, to differ from them both; to mistrust, on this subject especially (for we have abundant reason to mistrust it on subjects infinitely less intricate), the extent of our capacities; and to acknowledge that Foresight appertains to God, and Freedom to Man, though we cannot, in any wise, comprehend the possibility of their co-existence †. In this way of considering the

* Cum igitur nulla ratio, nullus sacrarum literarum locus sit, ex quo aperte colligi possit, Deum omnia quæ fiunt scivisse antequam fierent, concludendum est; minime asserendum esse a nobis istam Dei præscientiam; præsertim, cum et rationes non paucae, et sacra testimonia non desint, unde eam plane negandam esse appareat. Socini Op. tom. I. p. 549.

† I own freely to you the weakness of my understanding, that though it be unquestionable that there is Omnipotence and Omniscience in God our Maker, and I cannot have a clearer perception of any thing than that I am free; yet I cannot make Freedom in Man consistent with Omnipotence and Omniscience in God, though I am as fully persuaded of both as of any Truths I most firmly assent to. And therefore I have long since given off the consideration of that question, resolving all into this short conclusion; that if it be possible for God to make a free Agent, then Man is free, though I see not the way of it. Locke's Lett. to Molyneux.

subject, the Providence of God is implied in his very Existence as an intelligent Creator; and it imports not only an abstract Foresight of all possible events, but such a pre-disposition of causes and effects, such an adjustment of means and ends, as seems to us to exclude that contingency of human actions, with which, as expectants of positive rewards and punishments in another world, we firmly believe it to be altogether consistent.

Providence may be considered in another manner. We may understand by it, an uniform and constant operation of God subsequent to the act of creation. Here again the meaning of the term may be illustrated by what is observable in human contrivances. In every Machine formed by human ingenuity, there is a necessity for the action of some extraneous power to put the Machine in motion: a proper construction and disposition of parts is not sufficient to effect the end: there must be a spring, or a weight, or an impulse of air or water, of some substance or other, on which the motion of the several parts of the Machine must depend. In like manner, the Machine of the Universe depends on its Creator for the commencement and the conservation of the motion of its several parts. The power by which the insensible particles of matter coalesce into sensible lumps, as well as that by which the great orbs of the Universe are reluctantly, as it were, retained in their courses, admits not an explanation from the influence of mechanical causes: the effects of both of them are different from such as mere matter and motion can produce; they must ultimately be referred to God. Vegetable and animal life, and increase, cannot be accounted for without recurring to him, as

the primary cause of both. We have fruitful seasons; but we know not the cause by which the vapours are raised up from the earth, or poured down in rain from heaven; nor can the most recondite philosophy account for the germination or the maturation of a single grain. In this view of the subject, the Providence of God is something more than Foresight; it is a continued influence, an universal Agency; — “by him all things consist—and in him we live, and move, and have our Being.”

There is yet a third notion of Providence; implying a particular interposition of God in administering the affairs of individuals and nations, and wholly distinct from that general and incessant exertion of his power, by which he sustains the Universe in Existence. It is in this last sense that the wisdom of our Legislature considers Providence, when it ordains solemn assemblies for deprecating the vengeance, or supplicating the protection of Almighty God; and it is this sense of the word, which speculative men admit with the greatest difficulty: I speak not of bad men, for it would be to possess a zeal untempered by charity, to rank in that class every one who feels his deliberations on this important subject, disturbed by an irksome and involuntary Scepticism. Their difficulties are of two sorts; one respects the nature of God, the other the condition of Man. They think that, on the one hand, they can demonstrate the impossibility of that particular interposition we are now speaking of, from the abstract notions they have formed of the divine perfections: and they are persuaded, on the other, that experience of what happens to good and bad men, singly or collectively considered, does in no degree invalidate, but rather confirms

confirms that deduction of their reason ; and they produce the catastrophe which, as on this day, took place, as a proof in point.—I will briefly examine their mode of arguing on each head.

They conceive it then to be very conformable to the nature of the Supreme Being, as investigated by sober reasoning, that events, deriving their existence from his immutable will, as the primary cause of every thing, should succeed each other in a determined order ; or, in the language of one of the Fathers, they hold “ the Will of God to be the necessity of nature.” In this providence, or pre-disposition of all events, they acquiesce with gratitude and confidence ; believing that it fully answers the ends of a constant superintendency, accompanied by occasional interposition ; that confusion and chance are thereby removed out of the Universe ; that all things have been, are, and will be working together for the final good of all ; and that every particular thing, even what we call a miracle itself, comes to pass in its own proper time, according to a plan established by infinite goodness and wisdom before time was. Though I cannot look upon this notion of Providence to be the true one, yet is it not either destitute of sublimity, or liable to the imputation of Atheistic Fatality, or subversive of all Piety ; for we may praise God for his wisdom, and we may thank him for his goodness, in having disposed every thing in the best possible way ; and we may place an assured trust in him, that nothing will ever happen to us beyond or beside what he hath appointed ; but praise, thanksgiving and trust, are no mean parts of piety. It may be objected to this reasoning, that it renders all supplication unprofitable, the Supreme Being inexorable, the human
Race

Race impeccable, the order of Nature immutable, and the future fates of individuals and nations irreversible. I am sensible that the weight of these objections will not be great in the opinion of those, who either acknowledge no religion but that of nature, or who think that the doctrine of the final happiness of all mankind is not inconsistent with the principles of Christianity. To others these objections will be fully and clearly conclusive against that notion of the divine perfections from which they are derived. It may justly be observed by both, that this reasoning concerning the manner of God's moral government (if a moral government can on this supposition be admitted) takes for granted what it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to prove—that it is more conformable to the nature of a wise and beneficent Being, to form a system whose parts, material and spiritual, shall all be linked together in a fatal chain; than one which shall admit the contingency of human actions, and consequently seem to require, as a mean of its perfection, the interposition of divine agency.

As to the argument against the interposition of God in the Government of the World, which is taken from Experience, it will strike different Men with different degrees of force, according to the extent of their observation, or the bent of their disposition. Those who are acquainted with and believe the history of the Jewish Nation as delivered in the Bible, will find no great difficulty in admitting, that what has happened to one people may have happened to another; that God may have governed the other families of the earth, if not in so visible, yet in as effectual, a manner as he hath governed that of Judah. Their minds will be filled with piety from the perusal of the

sacred page: they will acknowledge the interposition of God, in what others will esteem the ordinary operation of physical or moral causes; in storms, in earthquakes, in famines, in pestilences, in foreign wars, in domestic dissensions, in peace, in prosperity, in every event tending to exalt or depress a nation. But there is a great part of mankind which has never heard of the Jewish people; and amongst us, who have heard of them, there are many who disbelieve the miraculous part of their ancient history, and attribute the singularity of their present condition to the operation of their religious polity: so that no evidence of God's Government of the world can be analogically collected by either of these sorts of men from the history of the Jews; and as to any direct proof of it, they will, with some shew of reason, maintain that it cannot be certainly deduced from the history of any other nation, ancient or modern. Could we in truth make ourselves minutely acquainted, not merely with the civil or military transactions of particular ages and countries, but with the virtues and vices, the happiness and misery, of all ages and all countries from the beginning of the world; in other words, could we obtain a distinct and complete history of the human race from the commencement of its existence to the present time, I question not but we should discern the arm of God clearly displayed in effecting the rise, regulating the progress, and accomplishing the destruction of particular states, in strict conformity to their adherence to, or deviation from, the rule of Moral Rectitude. But the time of our existence here is so short, the means of acquiring universal historical information so impossible to be obtained, and the attention of men so occupied by other concerns, that no one can gain such a comprehensive view of the morals and fortunes
of

of the human Species, as to remove all doubt concerning the divine Administration of human Affairs. This our utter inability to comprehend the whole of the divine Oeconomy, even in this world, should lessen, or rather should extinguish, our surprise, that “there should not in many ages be plain evidences enough either of the Wisdom or of the Justice and Goodness of God, or of so much as the interposition of divine Providence at all, to convince Mankind clearly and generally of the world’s being under his immediate care and inspection and government*.” But though the Evidences of the Wisdom and Justice and Goodness of God were much more numerous and plain than they appear to us to be; though the remuneration of Virtue and the punishment of Vice were much more uniform than many are disposed to admit them to be; nay, though we should grant, what few men will think reasonable, that there never hath been so much as one instance of a bad man being on the whole happy, or a good one on the whole unhappy, in this world, yet should we not be able from thence to conclude, that God governed this System by particular interpositions of his power: we should thence justly conclude, that he either governed it by such interpositions, or that he had so constituted the System when he first formed it, that all events respecting the connexion between virtue and happiness, vice and misery, should as certainly come to pass as if he was constantly exerting his Providence in their production. But if the experience of the most perfect uniformity in the moral government of the world, could not certainly enable us to decide concerning the manner of its being administered, whether by occasional interposition or primeval ordination, we may

* Clarke’s Evid. of Nat. and Rev. Rel.

properly enough conclude, that no argument can be justly drawn against this interposition from the want of such experience, from the real or imagined irregularity of that Government. We see but a very little part of this Government, either with relation to its extent or duration: it may be far more regular than it appears to us to be; there may be, which is most probable, no irregularity at all in it; but put its irregularity to be as great as you please, still will it be impossible for you to determine, whether that irregularity proceeds from a want of God's interposition in the Government of the World, or from what you will be apt, unwisely enough, to call a defect of Power, Wisdom, or Goodness, in its original constitution. "Touching the Almighty we cannot find him out,"—our faculties are annihilated in the immensity of the divine nature; the Eyes of our Understanding are blinded by the inaccessible brightness of the Lord's Glory; it shineth in us and around us, adorning with ineffable splendour all his works, not suffering us to doubt, for a moment, concerning either the existence or the skill of the great Architect of the Universe; but checking our presumption, and baffling all our efforts, when we would explore the nature of his existence, or the mode of his operation.

But if our Reason be inadequate, as it certainly is, to the investigation of the manner in which God administers the affairs of this world, we ought, with much thankfulness, to embrace the light which Revelation affords us in so obscure an inquiry. A single page of that Gospel which is unhappily so much, if not despised, certainly overlooked amongst us, conveys to us more knowledge concerning the Attributes of God

and our relation to him, than all the volumes of Philosophy which unassisted reason ever produced. But they only can be duly sensible of the value of Revelation, who have tried, with great care and attention, the strength, or rather the weakness of their faculties, in the investigation of such subjects as it teaches. The subject which we have been this day considering, you will readily allow, from the poor efforts which he hath made to explain it, is far above the comprehension of the Speaker; he cannot illustrate it to your satisfaction or his own: it is indeed a dark subject to understandings far more enlightened; yet open but the Bible, and it is as clear as the Mid-day Sun. You will there find Sinners exhorted to repentance, rewards promised to the righteous, punishments denounced against the wicked, and the duty of prayer enforced upon all, in a language so plain and express, as will not suffer you to doubt concerning your own Agency. You will there find God declaring, "That he maketh poor and maketh rich; that he removeth Kings and setteth up Kings; that he is the Governor among the nations; that he ruleth in the Kingdom of Men; that riches and honours and all things come of him; that of him, and through him, and to him, are all things; that he plucketh up and pulleth down, and repenteth of the Evil that he thought to do unto a nation, when that nation turneth from their evil!" surely these modes of expression will not suffer us to believe that all sublunary Events are irreversibly fixed from the Creation of the World, that our God is the God of Epicurus, exercising no superintendency over the inhabitants of the world.

I might now pass on to apply these general observations concerning Providence to the particular occasion of this day's meeting: but I forbear; for I dare not say, as some men said, that God was on their side, when they imbrued their hands in the blood of their King, and subverted the constitution of their country, because their attempts were attended with success; nor dare I affirm, with others, that the domestic Evils which the nation suffered during the Usurpation were evident proofs of God's displeasure at the Usurpers. For what is this but in our rash and short-sighted zeal to make the supreme Governor of the Universe a partisan in our disputes, an abettor on one side or other of what is wrong? We cannot fathom the depths of God's Councils: but from all his dispensations we may learn wisdom for the conduct of Life. From the disaster which we this day deplore, Kings may learn the danger of governing contrary to Law, and even of tenaciously contending for all the rights of their predecessors, when the circumstances and opinions of a great nation demand from them unusual concessions: and the People, on the other hand, may learn the danger of supporting any set of Men, or even either house of Parliament, in their attempts to infringe the established prerogative of the Crown, lest in redressing the grievances incident to Monarchy, they fabricate for themselves the tenfold fetters of Republican Tyranny. In all civil commotions there are so many bad-intentioned Men on the right, and well-intentioned Men on the wrong side, that it is impossible to make a general and just estimate of the moral merit or demerit of either side. Allow me therefore, instead of ripping up wounds which have
long

long been closed, briefly to advert to our present situation, new and critical no doubt, as a people.

Humanly speaking then, there is no cause for our Despondence. It is true, a mighty Empire has been dismembered;—but what is there so beneficial to Mankind in mighty Empires, as to make us regret, on principles of impartial Justice and general Humanity, the diminution of our own? The great Ends for which Men enter into Society are best secured in small Empires. When by conquest or colonization they become so large, that all the parts of them cannot equally participate in the benefits of civil union, it is the extreme of Folly to expect, that the parts which are oppressed should wish for the continuance of that union; and it would be the extreme of Tyranny to compel them to submit to it. The Tyranny of a Prince over his Subjects, is an intolerable Evil: but the Tyranny of an over-grown state over its distant dependencies, is an Evil of infinitely greater magnitude. Provinces far removed from the Seat of Empire, and which have no share in its Legislation, are not only liable to be aggrieved by the insolence, and plundered by the rapacity of petty Governors, but to have their best interests neglected, if not opposed, by the supreme Legislature itself. A Free Constitution must, from its very nature, be limited in its extent, whilst the chains of Slavery may reach round the Globe. The Freedom of the Roman Constitution was circumscribed almost by the Walls of their City, but the Tyranny of the Roman Empire overspread the World. America, as a Limb connected with the British body politic, might have been starved for ages, and stunted in its growth, might have been robbed of its proper nutriment, and kept cold and comfortless, that the heart might be kept fat and warm. But unquestionably,

questionably, it is for the benefit of our Species that all such connexions should be broken; that infant States should be allowed to increase to their full maturity, and to establish their own independent Legislatures, in order that the Earth may be replenished with Inhabitants, and the Blessings of Civil Liberty be equally enjoyed by all Mankind. There is natural justice and moderation in this reasoning; it suits not the despotic views of particular States, but it is calculated to promote the general happiness of the human race: and he is quite a stranger to the Benignity of the Christian Religion, and deserves not to feel the Freedom of the British Constitution, who wishes to aggrandize his own Country by bringing slavery and ruin on that of other Men.

I wish I could consider our acquisitions in Asia as compensating our losses in America; but they have been obtained, I fear, by unjust force, and on that account I cannot think that they will be useful to us. It requires little political sagacity to foretell, that the natives will pay their tribute with reluctance; that it will be expended in the maintenance of the standing army by which it must be collected; that our enemies in Europe, jealous of the resources which we shall stand a chance of deriving from Asia, will endeavour to counteract all our projects of interest and ambition, and to make that country another America to this nation. Would to God that we had Wisdom and Magnanimity enough to devise safe means of restoring the territory in the East to its rightful owners, and to content ourselves with the profits freely flowing from its commerce! Then would our politics be founded in Justice; the blessing of God would be their support; and the imminent danger to the constitution, from that increase of corrupting influence which, almost unavoidably,

voidably, attends an increase of Empire, and which is equally destructive of the public probity of individuals, equally subversive of the public liberty of the state, in whose hands soever it be placed, would be done away. But if this be thought a visionary project, or, considering our relation to the other states of Europe, a dangerous one; alas! that the spirit of Christianity is so little understood in Christendom as to make it seem so. Yet there is nothing visionary, nothing dangerous, we presume, in hoping, that our Rulers, in settling the affairs of India, will pay more attention to the spiritual condition of its inhabitants than has been hitherto done, will zealously use every lenient and Evangelical mean to effect their conversion to Christianity. Thus may the Indians, by changing their Masters, better their condition; and God, who bringeth Good out of Evil, may make the Avarice of one part of his creatures, become the occasion of eternal Salvation to another.

It is true, the value of our landed property is now much less than it was some years ago: but this has a dependence on the state of our commerce; and our commerce, though it has suffered a temporary obstruction, will soon expand itself into all its former channels; and it will do this, because we can supply foreign markets with better goods, at a cheaper rate, and with a longer credit, than our neighbours can do: and these being more just, will therefore be more sure and permanent sources of profit to us, than an arbitrary and precarious monopoly of the trade of half the globe. — The debt of the nation is confessedly great: but the property of the nation, consisting of the accumulated property of the individuals composing the nation, is, we conjecture, at least six times greater than the national debt. — The wealth of individuals has been lessened: it is to be hoped, that
the

the dissoluteness of all ranks has thereby received a check.— We are still a great and powerful people, though fallen from that summit of greatness which is seldom productive of virtue; though despoiled of that power of doing wrong with impunity, which no individual, no nation ought ever to enjoy. I do not here inquire, whether on the Ocean we exercised that power towards the other states of Europe; but it is clear they thought we possessed it, and under the influence of that opinion it was natural for them, in the day of our distress, to combine together that we should possess it no more.—Though some things in our Civil, and some in our Ecclesiastical Constitution, may not be so perfect as to admit of no improvement; yet, in both respects, we are an happy people, when compared with most of the other nations around us.

But great and happy as we are, there is much room left for those whom it may concern, to make the attempt of rendering us greater and happier; and we sincerely pray to God that all parties may be disposed to do this, not by sacrificing public confidence to private animosity; the stability of government to selfish or ambitious struggles for power; not by indulging a proud propensity to embrace the first favourable opportunity of regaining our glory, as it is called, by the renewal of war; not by prosecuting unjust views of commercial monopoly, or territorial conquest, in distant countries; but by taking the most prudent measures at home, to heal our divisions, to encrease our numbers, and to amend our morals; for the Strength, foreign and domestic, of every nation upon Earth, must ultimately, under God, depend on the Union, and on the Number of its inhabitants, and its Happiness on their VIRTUE,

F I N I S.

